

DESERT GOLD by Zane Grey

Author of Riders of the Purple Sage, Wildfire, Etc.

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THE YAQUI

SYNOPSIS—Seeking gold in the desert, "Cameron," solitary prospector, forms a partnership with an unknown man whom he later learns is Jonas Warren, father of a girl whom Cameron wronged, but later married, back in Illinois. Cameron's explanations appease Warren, and the two proceed together. Taking refuge from a sandstorm in a cave, Cameron discovers gold, but too late; both men are dying. Cameron leaves evidence in the cave of their discovery of gold, and personal documents. Richard Gale, adventurer, in Castita, Mexican border town, meets George Thorne, lieutenant in the Ninth cavalry, old college friend. Thorne tells Gale he is there to save Mercedes Castaneda, Spanish girl, his affianced wife, from Rojas, Mexican bandit. Gale "roughhouses" Rojas and his gang, with the help of two American cowboys, and he and Mercedes and Thorne escape. A huge call from the fort orders Thorne to his regiment. He leaves Mercedes under Gale's protection. The pair, aided by the cowboys Charlie Ladd and Jim Lash, arrive in safety at a ranch known as Forlorn River, across the border. The fugitives are at Tom Belding's home. Belding is immigration inspector. Living with him are his wife and step-daughter, Nell Burton. Gale, with Ladd and Lash, take service with Belding as rangers. Gale telling Belding the story of his being a prospector, and standing with his father, the son's business ability, the son's word to Thorne, Belding gets word to Thorne. Belding, Dick and his parents, informing them of the news, attract

CHAPTER I

Then Gale returned to the fire, replenished it, and took a drink of dead greasewood. He and the others, he said, were to be brought to the house, and to wait there until he brought in the horse.

The first thing Gale saw when he stepped out of the cave was a man who looked like a prospector. He was wearing a hat and a long coat, and he was holding a rifle.

Gale looked at the man for a moment, and then he spoke. "What's your name?" he asked. "My name is Richard Gale," the man replied. "I'm a prospector, and I'm looking for gold."

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was enabled to get closer to the well, and somewhat above it.

The Mexicans were leisurely cooking their morning meal. A slow wrath stirred in Gale as he watched the trio. They showed not the slightest indication of breaking camp. One fellow evidently the leader, packed a gun at his hip, the only weapon in sight. Gale noted this with speculative eyes.

Then he saw two Indians on burros come riding up the other side of the knoll upon which the adobe house stood; and apparently they were not aware of the presence of the Mexicans, for they came on up the path. One Indian was a Papago. The other, striking in appearance for other reasons than that he seemed to be about to fall from the burro, Gale took to be a Yaqui. They came over the knoll and down the path toward the well.

Gale heard a short, shrill cry, strangely high and wild, and this came from one of the Indians. It was answered by hoarse shouts. Then the leader of the trio, the Mexican who packed a gun, pulled it and fired point blank. He missed once—and again. At the third shot the Papago shrieked and tumbled off his burro to fall in a heap. The other Indian swayed, as if the taking away of the support lent by his comrade had brought collapse, and with the fourth shot he, too, slipped to the ground.

The reports had frightened the horses in the corral; and a vicious black, crowding the rickety bars broke them down. He came plunging out. With a splendid vaulting mount the Mexican with the gun leaped to the back of the horse. He yelled and waved his gun, and urged the black forward. The manner of all three was savagely loose. They were having sport. The two on the ground began to dance and jabber. The mounted leader shot again, and then stung like a leech upon the bare back of the rearing black. It was a vain show of horsemanship. Then this Mexican, by some strange grip, brought the horse down, plunging almost upon the body of the Indian that had fallen last.

Gale stood agast with his rifle clutched tight. He could not divine the intention of the raider, but suspected something strikingly brutal. The horse answered to that cruel culling hand, yet he swerved and bucked. He reared aloft, pawing the air, wildly snorting, then he plunged down upon the prostrate Indian. Even in the act the intelligent animal tried to keep from striking the body with his hoofs. But that was not possible. A yell hideous in its passion, signaled this feat of horsemanship.

The Mexican made no move to trample the body of the Papago. He turned the black to ride again over the body of the dead Indian.

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stone he dismantled each weapon. That done, he set out on a run for his horse. Blanco Sol heard him coming and whistled a welcome, and when Gale ran up the horse was snorting war. Mounting, Gale rode rapidly back to the scene of the action, and his first thought, when he arrived at the well, was to give Sol a drink and to fill his canteens.

Then Gale led his horse up out of the waterhole, and decided before remounting to have a look at the Indians. The Papago had been shot through the heart, but the Yaqui was still alive. Moreover, he was conscious and staring up at Gale with great, strange, somber eyes, black as volcanic slag.

"Gringo good—no sill," he said, in husky whisper. His speech was not affirmative so much as questioning.

"Yaqui, you're done for," said Gale, and his words were positive. He was simply speaking aloud his mind.

"Yaqui—no hurt—much," replied the Indian, and then he spoke a strange word—repeated it again and again.

An instinct of Gale's, or perhaps some suggestion in the husky, thick whisper or dark face, told Gale to reach for his canteen. He lifted the Indian and gave him a drink, and if ever in all his life he saw gratitude in human eyes he saw it then. Then he examined the injured Yaqui. The Indian had three wounds—a bullet hole in his shoulder, a crushed arm, and a badly lacerated leg.

The ranger thought rapidly. This Yaqui would live unless left there to die or be murdered by the Mexicans when they found courage to sneak back to the well. It never occurred to Gale to abandon the poor fellow. All the same, he knew he multiplied his perils a hundredfold by burdening himself with a crippled Indian. Swiftly he set to work, and with rifle ever under his hand, and shifting glance spared from his task, he bound up the Yaqui's wounds. At the same time he kept keen watch.

The Indians' burros and the horses of the raiders were all out of sight. Time was too valuable for Gale to use any in what might be vain search. Therefore, he lifted the Yaqui upon Sol's broad shoulders and climbed into the saddle. At a word Sol dropped his head and started eastward up the trail, walking swiftly, without resentment for his double burden.

Gale, bearing in mind the ever-present possibility of encountering more raiders and of being pursued, saved the strength of the horse. Once out of sight of Papago well, Gale dismounted and walked beside the horse, steadying with one firm hand the helpless, dangling Yaqui.

Gale kept pace with his horse. He bore the twinge of pain that darted through his injured hip at every stride. In the heat of midday he halted in the shade of a rock, and, lifting the Yaqui down, gave him a drink. Then, after a long, sweeping survey of the surrounding desert, he removed Sol's saddle and let him roll, and took for him self a well-earned rest and a bite to eat.

The tenacious of life. He was looking at the first time. Gale looked at the Indian for a moment, and then he spoke. "What's your name?" he asked. "My name is Richard Gale," the man replied. "I'm a prospector, and I'm looking for gold."

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"Because I chose," whispered Gale, in reply. "Go after him—he dropped in the trail—across the river—near the first big saguaro."

"Sure, Dick, sure," Belding replied. In softer tones. Then he stalked out; his heels rang on the flagstones; he opened a door and called: "Mother—girls, here's Dick back. He's done up. . . . Do what you can to make him comfortable. I've got a little job on hand."

Gale slept twenty hours. Then he arose, thirsty, hungry, lame, overworn, and presently went in search of Belding and the business of the day.

"Your Yaqui was near dead, but guess we'll pull him through," said Belding.

Gale told of his experience at Papago well.

"That raider who tried to grind the Yaqui under a horse's hoofs—he was a hyena!" concluded Gale, shuddering. "I've seen some blood spilled and some hard sights, but that inhuman devil took my nerve. Why, as I told you, Belding, I missed a shot at him—not twenty paces!"

"Dick, in cases like that the sooner you clean up the bunch the better," said Belding, grimly. "As for hard sights—wait till you've seen a Yaqui do up a Mexican. Bar none, that is the limit! Dick, if I'm not mistaken, this fellow was a chief. It was a waste of strength, a needless risk for you to save him, pack him back here. But, damn the whole Greaser outfit generally, I'm glad you did!"

Gale remembered then to speak of his concern for Ladd.

"Laddy didn't go out to meet you," replied Belding. "I knew you were due in any day, and, as there's been trouble between here and Castita, I sent him that way. Since you've been out our friend Carter lost a bunch of horses and a few steers. Did you get a good look at the horses those raiders had at Papago well?"

Dick had learned, since he had become a ranger, to see everything with keen, sure, photographic eye; and, being put to the test so often required of him, he described the horses as a dark-colored drove, mostly bays and blacks, with one spotted sorrel.

"Some of Carter's—sure as you're born!" exclaimed Belding.

"Well, what shall I do now?" asked Dick.

"Stay here and rest," bluntly replied Belding. "You need it. Let the women fuss over you—doctor you a little. When Jim gets back from Sonoyta I'll know more about what we ought to do."

Gale had received several letters from his sister Elsie, the last of which he had not answered. There had not been much opportunity for writing on his infrequent returns to Forlorn River; and, besides, Elsie had written that her father had stormed over what he considered Dick's falling into wild and evil ways.

"Time flies," said Dick. "George Thorne will be free before long, and he'll be coming out. I wonder if he'll stay here or try to take Mercedes away?"

"Well, he'll stay right here in Forlorn River, if I have any say," replied Belding. "I'd like to know how he'd ever get that Spanish girl out of the country now, with all the trails overrun by rebels and raiders. It'd be hard to disguise her. Say, Dick, maybe we can get Thorne to stay here. You know, since you've discovered the possibility of a big water supply. I've had dreams of a future for Forlorn River. . . . If only this war was over!"

The discovery that Belding alluded to was one that might well lead to the making of a wonderful and agricultural district of Altar valley. While in college Dick Gale had studied engineering, but he had not set the scientific world afire with his brilliance. Nevertheless, his smattering of engineering skill bore fruit in the last place on earth where anything might have been expected of it—in the desert. Gale had always wondered about the source of Forlorn River. He had discovered a long, narrow, rock-bottomed and rock-walled gulch that could be dammed at the lower end by the dynamiting of leaning cliffs above. An inexhaustible supply of water could be stored there. Furthermore, he had worked out an irrigation plan to bring the water down for mining uses, and to make a paradise out of that part of Altar valley which lay in the United States. Belding claimed there was gold in the arroyos, gold in the gulches, not in quantities to make a prospector rejoice, but enough to work for. And the soil on the higher levels of Altar valley needed only water to make it grow anything the year round. Gale, too, had come to have dreams of a future for Forlorn River.

On the afternoon of the following day Ladd unexpectedly appeared leading a lame and lathered horse from the yard. The legs of the horse were raw and red, and he seemed about to drop. Ladd's sombrero was missing, he wore a bloody scarf round his head, sweat and blood and dust had formed a crust on his face; little streams of powder-lust slid from him; and the

lower half of his scarred chaps were full of broken white thorns.

"Howdy, boys," he drawled. "I shore am glad to see you all."

"Laddy, go in the house to the women," said Belding. "I'll tend to your horse."

"Shore, Tom, in a minute. I've been down the road. An' I found hoss tracks and steer tracks goin' across the line. But I seen no sign of raiders till this mornin'. Slept at Carter's last night. That raid the other day cleaned him out. He's shootin' mad. Well, this mornin' I rode plumb into a bunch of Carter's hosses, runnin' wild for home. Some Greasers were tryin' to head them round an' chase them back across the line. I rode in between an' made matters embarrassin'. Carter's hosses got away. Then me an' the Greasers had a little game



"Shore, Nell, it's only a scratch. My Bronch Threw Me."

of hide an' seek in the cactus. I was on the wrong side, an' had to break through their line to head toward home. We run some. But I had a closer call than I'm stuck on havin'."

Belding cursed low and deep in his throat, and the sound resembled muttering thunder. The shade of anxiety on his face changed to one of dark gloom and passion. Next to his wife and daughter there was nothing so dear to him as his white horses. His father and his grandfather—all his progenitors of whom he had traced—had been lovers of horses. It was in Belding's blood.

"Laddy, before it's too late can't I get the whites away from the border?"

"I reckon we'd better stick here, Tom. . . . Dick, it's some good to see you again. But you seem kinda quiet. Shore you get quieter all the time. Did you see any sign of Jim out Sonoyta way?"

Then Belding led the lame horse toward the watering-trough, while the two rangers went toward the house. Dick was telling Ladd about the affair at Papago well when they turned the corner under the porch. Nell was sitting in the door. She rose with a little scream and came flying toward them.

"Now I'll get it," whispered Ladd. "The women'll make a baby of me. An' shore I can't help myself."

"Oh, Laddy, you've been hurt!" cried Nell, as with white cheeks and dilating eyes she ran to him and caught his arm.

"Shore, Nell, it's only a scratch. My bronch threw me."

"Laddy, no horse ever threw you. You've been shot! . . . Mamma, here's Laddy, and he's been shot. . . . Oh, these dreadful days we're having! I can't bear them! Forlorn River used to be so safe and quiet. Nothing happened. But now! Jim comes home with a bloody head in him—then Dick—then Laddy! . . . Oh, I'm afraid some day they'll never come home."

The morning was bright, still, and clear as crystal. The heat waves had not yet begun to rise from the desert. Nell sat perched high upon the topmost bar of the corral gate. Dick leaned beside her, now with his eyes on her face, now gazing out into the alfalfa field where Belding's thoroughbreds grazed and pranced and romped and whistled. Nell watched the horses. She loved them, never tired of watching them. But her gaze was too consciously averted from the yearning eyes that tried to meet hers to be altogether natural.

"I'll be—be—pretty hard to leave Sol—when I go away."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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